

REACHING FOR AN ANSWER

A homily by Galen Guengerich
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
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When the English novelist Anthony Trollope returned to London in 1872 after a year and a half in Australia, he was indignant at what he saw. Commercial interests ruthlessly ruled the capital of the British Empire, fueled by reckless financial speculation and careless credit. People were obsessed with social standing. Relationships were only as a means of climbing the ladder. In Trollope's view, it was an altogether unseemly specter.

Not surprisingly, Trollope's response was to write a satirical novel, which he titled *The Way We Live Now*. At more than 1,000 pages, it's the longest of his 40-plus novels and arguably the most derisive. In his autobiography, Trollope explains why he wrote the novel. He says:

A certain class of dishonesty, dishonesty magnificent in its proportions, and climbing into high places, has become at the same time so rampant and so splendid that there seems to be reason for fearing that men and women will be taught to feel that dishonesty, if it can become splendid, will cease to be abominable. If dishonesty can live in a gorgeous palace with pictures on all its walls, and gems in all its cupboards, with marble and ivory in all its corners, and can give [epicurean] dinners, and get into Parliament, and deal in millions, then dishonesty is not disgraceful, and the man dishonest after such a fashion is not a low scoundrel. Instigated, I say, by some such reflections as these, I sat down in my new house to write *The Way We Live Now*.

While some of the moneyed scoundrels in Trollope's harshly critical tale eventually get their comeuppance, the story of London remained a tale of two cities, as Charles Dickens had described it a decade or so earlier. Of course, Trollope had his own shortcomings. His unseemly anti-Semitism undercuts the moral authority he wields against the duplicity of his day.

Even so, the travesties of his day remind us of the travesties of our own. We too have seen dishonesty of magnificent proportions climbing into high places. As a result, we too have seen dishonesty cease to be abominable or disgraceful, at least to many. In response to the dishonesty of his day, Trollope wrote a novel. In response to the dishonesty of ours, we write letters to editors and senators. We organize and protest. We contribute to organizations that seek integrity in our common life.

We also come to All Souls. At the outset of worship, we declare that we have gathered “in the freedom of the truth.” Over a period of 200 years, this has been a house that truth-seeking has built. We seek the truth about nature — about our utter reliance upon it and our often-shirked responsibility to care for it. We seek the truth about human nature — about our persistent penchant for selfishness and greed, and our often-disregarded need for repentance and renewal. We seek the truth about the role of human dignity in human flourishing.

The late Pulitzer prize-winning American poet Mary Oliver asks in one of her poems, “What is life but reaching for an answer? And what is death but a refusal to grow?”

Here at All Souls, we’re reaching for an answer. For 200 years, this congregation has continued to grow. This is the house that truth-seeking built.

Indeed, a national tussle over the ultimate source of truth led to the founding of All Souls. During the 17th and 18th centuries in Europe, the Enlightenment emerged to challenge the ultimate authority of the Bible and Christian doctrine. Enlightenment thinkers believed the universe could be understood through the use of reason, and truth could be arrived at through experiment and observation.

Not surprisingly, the Christian church fought back. From the 1720’s to the 1740’s, first in England then in the New World, a sweeping revival movement known as the Great Awakening warned people to reject human reason and experience as the source of ultimate truth. During the first half of the 19th century, another vast and powerful religious revival, known as the Second Great Awakening, spread westward from New England to Kentucky. By the 1820’s, this movement, also known as the evangelical movement, had become one of the most dynamic and important cultural forces in American life.

But the champions of reason could not be silenced. In his nationally-prominent sermon that led to the founding of All Souls in 1819, William Ellery Channing said that the Bible must be interpreted by reason. He argued that the Christian doctrine of the Trinity was contrary to scripture and incompatible with reason. Jesus was a great prophet and teacher, Channing said, but not divine, not the son of God.

Another voice that championed reason and experience over divine revelation was the poet William Cullen Bryant, who was an active member of this congregation from 1825 until his death in 1878. Trained as a lawyer in Massachusetts, Bryant came to New York at the invitation of Catharine Sedgwick, one of America’s leading novelists who was also a member of All Souls.

For much of the 19th century, Bryant was easily the best known poet in the nation, his fame equaled later in the century only by Emerson and Longfellow. Five hymns in our congregation’s first hymnal featured poems by Bryant, one of which we will sing today as our closing hymn. As the first truly American poet, Bryant wrote poems that celebrated the world of nature as a source of divine inspiration.

In his poem titled “The Ages,” Bryant writes:

Look on this beautiful world, and read the truth
In [its] fair page; see, every season brings
New change, to it, of everlasting youth...

Bryant's goal, in his poetry and in his substantial involvement here at All Souls and beyond, was to extend the domain of truth — the often-difficult truth about human foibles and failures, the often-sublime truth about the world we inhabit, and the always-evolving truth about our possible future. Bryant's poem continues:

Thus error's monstrous shapes from earth are driven;
They fade, they fly — but truth survives their flight;
Earth has no shades to quench that beam of heaven;
Each ray that shone, in early time, to light
The faltering footsteps in the path of right,
Each gleam of clearer brightness shed to aid
In [our] maturer day [our] bolder sight...
Pour yet, and still shall pour, the blaze that cannot fade.

For 200 years, this has been the house that truth-seeking has built. Even today, we're still reaching for an answer. In early times, and now, and always, truth is the blaze that cannot fade.